One of You

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

St. Columba’s Episcopal Church ~ Washington, DC ~ Live God’s Love

Matthew 25:1-13 ~ Wisdom 6:12-20 ~ November 12, 2023

News cameras do not linger long on the same story, but a few weeks back many universities were in the spotlight. Voices decrying the violence of Hamas, voices spewing anti-Semitic bile; voices – anti-Palestinian, anti-Israel. Many outside the gates were quick to vilify the students for speaking, to vilify administrators for not speaking. Donors, governors alike threaten to withhold funds.

To pick one story: a junior at Cornell posted violent anti-Semitic threats prompted his arrest. Amid tensions on campus, a friend forwarded to me a letter she had received from her friend, Jane-Marie Law, an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Cornell. She wrote, she said, to tell a story that happens every day but never makes the news. She describes one of her classes. “Among the 23 students are just about every form of diversity one can imagine: racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, nationality, gender, religious, dietary, able bodied and not, and political… eight different religions,… six different countries.”

After the massacre by Hamas, her students, “did not scramble to find a simple position: They opened up to one another in remarkable ways…, they listened to one another, and showed an enormous care for one another that was beyond avoiding uncomfortable conversations. They were filled with self-recriminations that they did not understand the situation with more nuance. They felt guilty to be continuing to go about their lives and their studies when the world was dealt so many horrible blows in such quick succession. Rather than hardening into ideological positions, they got soft and open to one another.” (end quote)

Got soft, open – to one another. What enables, allows, prompts such a posture? How do we cultivate the space in our hearts, in our communities to retain moral clarity, yet resist the calls upon us to make false choice? So quickly we are seduced by the myth of redemptive violence; while, more violence is never the better answer. I believe we’re offered a clue in today’s parable. How so? Because Jesus’ call to us is to watch, be prepared. How do we prepare for an unexpected hour? Is it not to live as one awake, open, receptive, soft?

First, the parable itself. In this patrilocal society, soon after a marriage, the bride moved in with the groom’s family. The custom was for the bride to wait until the groom came to her, then go together to his home. Her bridesmaids were on hand to assist and escort her. To our sensibility, this parable is jarring. Why didn’t the five with oil share some of what they had? Why was the groom such a jerk, slamming the door? Where’s the generosity, forgiveness, grace? That the parable is harsh sharpens the focus: the call to stay awake, be prepared. You can’t borrow someone else’s readiness. We alone can prepare our own hearts for times of trial.

Five bridesmaids were wise. The story is paired with readings from the Wisdom of Solomon. In the verses we heard as a reading and recited in place of the psalm, Wisdom – Sophia – is personified. Wisdom seeks out the sage, as sage Solomon seeks wisdom as a bride. A gift of reciprocity to those who seek wisdom. The one who longs for wisdom, is instructed to rise up early to meet her, to be vigilant. Yet wisdom is not passive. She does not wait; she “hastens to make herself known,” she “sits at the gate,” “she appears to them in their paths.”

The Wisdom we seek is here before us; we don’t have to acquire it, or defeat anything; we only need to want it. The yearning itself shall suffice. Be prepared. How are we prepared? Attentive?

Years ago I set out on a difficult church mission that involved removing a bishop from office. My colleagues on the Diocesan Standing Committee gave me this padded headgear (for boxers). I appreciated their humor and care, but when Paul taught the Ephesians to put on the whole armor of God, I do not believe this is what he had in mind. What then shall we put on? What shall we practice? I have some ideas, but let me ask you, when the world is hard, the going gets tough, to whom do you turn? Where do you seek nourishment, strength, courage? For what do you pray?

I’ve been thinking a lot about this, I’ve been praying about this: With all that is hard, how do we take care of one another, take care of ourselves, and in so doing, move the world ever so slightly toward grace? I believe that what we are doing here together is absolutely vital for the well-being of our souls and our world. We are practicing what we believe to be the essence of beloved community. So what is it that we do that is so important?

Let me name the ways in something of a love letter:

One of you delivered a vase of flowers to a woman on the anniversary of her husband’s death, one of you arranged the flowers in that vase,

one of you listened gently as another shared that he’d lost his job,

one of you cooked a meal and brought it to the woman just returned from a stint at the hospital,

one of you got up early to prepare the coffee or the sacristy, to open the doors, to be ready to greet someone you do not yet know, a fellow traveler,

one of you stood on the corner and collected coats for migrants arriving with nothing,

one of you knelt quietly in the sanctuary, remembering her touch, the sound of her voice, as your tears welled up,

one of you took the time to see and thank the person attending to your little chore at the shop,

one of you smiled at the sound of the birdsong,

one of you helped repair a kitchen for a family you’d never met,

one of you picks up the phone and hard as it is begins with “I’m sorry”,

one of you did some serious wrangling to get everyone here on time – or at least some of them,

one of you sought out neighbors from other houses of worship to seek common cause for justice,

one of you wrestled quietly with the prospect of pledging to give even more this year than last,

one of you squatted down to be eye level with the five-year old who wanted to share his revelation about God’s love,

one of you wakes up early each day to center yourself in silence to notice your breath – the Holy Spirit – within you,

one of you waited patiently graciously to provide a shower and clean clothes,

one of you jumped or clapped or even honked with joy because that’s what the song called for,

one of you walked the labyrinth with your child and noticed the hush come over you,

one of you will lay hands upon on another and offer prayers of healing, one of you will be the one receiving that love,

one of you overcame much fear and ambivalence to even walk into the doors of a church,

one of you shared your thorns and roses, feeling exposed,

one of you spoke truth when it felt hard to do so, bore witness,

one of you walked with a teenage youth as she made a mature commitment to faith, one of you is that youth and you invited your friend to come to the party,

one of you pauses in the midst of your day to whisper silent prayers of “thank you”,

one of you dared to offer your own interpretation of that problematic Bible verse, one of you…

… and that was just Tuesday.

Who have I missed? What have you witnessed? What blessing have you received? For whom or for what are you grateful?

Let us notice the gifts, the blessings. Let us not neglect to say thank you, even as a whisper within. One of you… Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, “just begin: one, one, one. We may do no great things; we do small things with great love.”

When Cornell cancelled classes to call for a day of peace, Professor Jane-Marie Law invited her to students to keep their pjs on, meet via zoom and share a favorite poem. She writes, “everyone showed up.. we read poetry together, poetry about putting your soul back together, poetry about the natural world and about bees, and about birds. There is a kind of special hush that comes over young people when they’re far from home and they’re learning the textures of their hearts and souls and minds without having it mediated by a standard curriculum. It takes my breath away sometimes, that hush. Miracles happen every day at universities as diverse as ours. But it’s so common place we never think to report it.”

Dear ones, one of you… one of you is prepared, awake. One of you noticed the miracle of this day. One of you is living God’s love. So too another, and another – living God’s love. One, one, one of you… That’s how the fire spreads. Live God’s Love. Amen.